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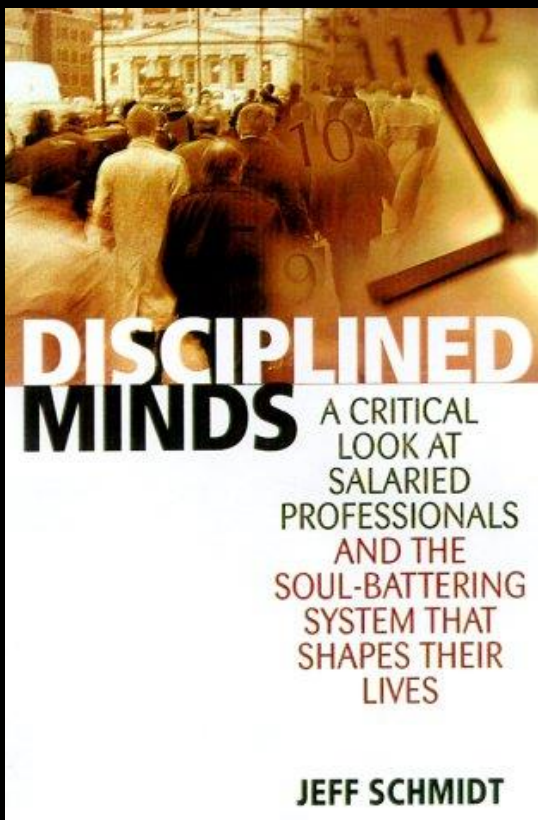


ORGANIZE OR CONFORM; CONFRONT OR BE OBLITERATED

DISCIPLINED MINDS

Author: Jeff Schmidt, 2000

Mike Ryan



The status of "professional" in America indicates to the masses that you have made something of yourself. You have become one of the best and the brightest. You have proved your worth. You will probably live longer than most people. You get paid well. But what sort of Faustian deal had to be made to get there? The "best and the brightest" Americans, as historian Howard Zinn has pointed out, are the people who have engineered atrocities like the Vietnam War. More recently, these engineers have been manufacturing the consent of the two biggest American historical events so far in the 21st century: the farcical 2000 U.S. presidential election and the ambiguous terror of the War on Terrorism. And where do these astute professionals come from? They are products of the American education system, of course.

In 1967, an English professor at Cal State L.A. named Jerry Farber declared in his underground classic essay "The Student as Nigger," "Back in kindergarten you found out that teachers only love children who stand in nice straight lines. And that's where it's been at ever since. Nothing changes except to get worse. School becomes more and more

obviously like a prison." If that's true, then what are the effects on the "inmates" after being there for 12, 16, or even 20 years if they want to become professionals or attain graduate degrees? Jeff Schmidt addresses the tail end of this question and explains what can be done about it in his book *Disciplined Minds: A critical look at salaried professionals and the soul-battering system that shapes their lives*.

Schmidt himself received a PhD in physics from the University of California, Irvine, taught physics around the world, and until May 31, 2000, was an articles editor at *Physics Today* magazine. After publishers Rowman & Littlefield released his book, *Physics Today* fired him, citing the book's very existence as evidence that he was not "fully engaged" at work. Of course, that's the main idea within the book. No sane employee in a hierarchical institution, Schmidt argues, can be fully engaged in his or her work, because the company's interests are in conflict with the employee's personal interests.

Management's abrupt termination of Schmidt also responded to the opening lines of *Disciplined Minds*: "This book is stolen. Written in part on stolen time, that is. I felt I had no choice but to do it that way. Like millions of others who work for a living, I was giving most of my prime time to my employer. My job simply didn't leave me enough energy for a major project of my own, and no one was about to hire me to pursue my own vision, especially given my irreverent attitude toward employers."

In Schmidt's defense, he worked at *Physics Today* for 19 years and consistently received satisfactory or above average performance reviews as well as pay raises and promotions. Obviously, he had been doing his job.

However, *Physics Today* management dismissed him because, "The employee admittedly used company time to work on a personal project over an extended period of time" (Schmidt, "State Rejects *Physics Today*'s Charge of Employee Misconduct," <http://disciplined-minds.com>).

To put the company's accusation in perspective, consider another time thief: Albert Einstein. Einstein did a lot of his physics theorizing while at work at the Swiss patent office, including his discovery of the notoriously subversive equation, $E=mc^2$.

However, wasting time on the job is not why Schmidt was fired. *Physics Today* fired Jeff Schmidt because he is a radical, activist professional.

"The hidden root of much career dissatisfaction is the professional's lack of control over the 'political' component of his or her creative work," he says in *Disciplined Minds*. *Physics Today*'s management would, of course, reject the idea that such a political component even exists. Ironically, however, they drew attention to it by firing Schmidt over his political expression.

While Schmidt would agree with Farber that the education system as a whole works to create obedient people, in *Disciplined Minds* he narrows his focus to graduate and professional training, which, he says, "Ultimately produces obedient thinkers-highly educated employees who do their assigned work without questioning its goals. Professional education is a battle for the very identity of the individual."

Schmidt examines and criticizes the professional credentialing process by recounting his own struggles in graduate school, assailing GRE and other professional testing results as nothing more than gauges that determine a person's willingness to be an obedient thinker, and describing the conditions graduate and professional students live under as amounting to something like that of cult indoctrination: Exhaustion, isolation, humiliation, etc., over a period of years. Schmidt's cult indoctrination theory manifested itself after he interviewed students and found their stories uncannily similar to this type of brainwashing process.

A totalitarian graduate/professional school experience is not the one all students will have, Schmidt says, but "for students who aren't careful, it will be." So, while graduate school for Schmidt "amounted to getting paid to pursue [his] own interests, for many other students in the very same

program, graduate school was unrelentingly stressful; they emerged looking and acting like broken versions of their former selves."

If you want to become a professional, then, how do you maintain your individuality throughout such a process? You become an iconoclast. You question authority.

Schmidt comes to the brilliant conclusion that the United States Army's "Field Manual No. 21-78" is a resourceful handbook for those students who wish to maintain their identity instead of giving it up to a totalitarian process. The manual was written to teach U.S. soldiers how to resist brainwashing and exploitation as prisoners of war, and Schmidt finds that it transfers over surprisingly well to the intellectual boot camp known as graduate or professional school.

Using points made in the field manual and drawing on his own experiences as an activist grad student and professional, Schmidt puts together a chapter called, "How to Survive Professional Training with Your Values Intact." The simple point to grasp from this section is that "the student in professional training faces a tough choice: Organize or conform; confront or be obliterated."

In the last section of the book, called "Now or Never," Schmidt lists actions that anyone can take in their workplace or educational institution to maintain their value system. The main purpose behind all of the actions is to create a network of like-minded individuals, which will allow its members to maintain their personal perspectives. "People are individuals biologically," he says, "but they are individuals socially only if they maintain an independent perspective, and doing this is an ongoing creative process based on critical thinking." So, ranging from simply subscribing to radical publications to whistle-blowing to organizing unions to sabotage, Schmidt gives a wide range of actions limited only by the daring of the activist in question and meant to help people foster independent minds opposed to disciplined minds.

Jeff Schmidt is still working on getting his job back, relying on public pressure, the large amount of which has surprised even Schmidt. The book's website has a big section on efforts to help get his job back at <http://disciplined-minds.com> that includes letters to Physics Today management from hundreds of people including Noam Chomsky and Nobel Prize winning scientists. Whether or not Schmidt succeeds, this penalty on Physics Today's reputation is a form of justice, and a warning to authoritarian hierarchical structures everywhere.

Disciplined Minds is not just for professionals. While they are the target audience, it's revelation is just as important for non-professionals, especially those who may feel inferior to the institutional elite who influence most aspects of our lives; from teachers to police officers, journalists to politicians, and lawyers to doctors, just to name a few.

The difference between the established professionals and the rest of us is that they have indeed engaged in a Faustian deal with the education and professional system that they have likely not resisted but have swallowed hook, line, and sinker to become part of the highly touted professional class. But knowledge rules supreme over nearly everyone. Understanding that the professionals' facade of power is just that, they don't seem to have as much authority anymore, and those who

perhaps felt inferior could feel more confident and become more likely to question the so-called "expert" and "authoritative" professional opinions and the structures behind them. In doing so they will affirm their worth as a human being, and they may find allies with more access to institutional machinery in professionals like Jeff Schmidt, who are willing take on the higher sources of authority and risk their livelihood and reputation while making changes from the inside.

Like all books written by activists, if you believe Schmidt's argument in *Disciplined Minds* you are obliged to act in support of it, which can start by simply fostering your own independent thinking. If not, you are faced with the Orwellian existence where "if human equality is to be forever averted, then the state of existence is controlled insanity." Obviously no sane and reasonable person would accept such an existence, but would ask him or herself some questions: What do you stand for? Who do you trust? How will you maintain your critical thinking abilities? Where can you find reliable sources of information? When will you answer these questions and act on the solutions?

Mike Ryan was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1973 and grew up in its surrounding suburbs. After 12 years of indoctrination at Catholic schools he moved on to college, finally obtaining an English degree after 8 years of on-again off-again attendance. He now works in an office. While stealing time from his employer as best he can, he has since managed to produce radio interviews with people who can actually teach you something such as Lydia Lunch, Douglas Rushkoff, and V. Vale editor of *Re/Search* publications. These interviews have been transcribed and published in the form of his 'zine, *Circumspect*.